

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL  
10 FEBRUARY 1983

Weinberger, ex-CIA official debat first-strike po  
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BOSTON

A former CIA official today attacked the Reagan administration's threatened use of nuclear weapons to counter a Soviet ground attack in Europe, saying such a policy only increases the risk of atomic war.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger denied the charge. He said the first-strike option against overwhelming attack by conventional forces would prevent a Soviets attack.

The exchange between Weinberger and former Deputy CIA Director Herbert Scoville Jr. was contained in a series of letters to the editor of the New England Journal of Medicine on the nuclear arms race.

"The pertinent question," Weinberger wrote, "is whether we best deter Soviet aggression by announcing that NATO would never use nuclear weapons -- even if NATO faced defeat from a massive Soviet attack by conventional forces.

"Through its 20-year-old flexible response policy, NATO retains the option of escalation in response to an overwhelming Soviet conventional attack," he said.

Scoville, president of the Arms Control Association, a private anti-nuclear group, was joined in his attack on administration policy by several doctors, including Dr. Helen Caldicott, president of Physicians for Social Responsibility.

"Despite Weinberger's claim that our goal is improved deterrence and a retaliatory capability, both his weapons and arms control programs are only increasing the risk that a nuclear war with all its devastation will occur," Scoville said.

He said Weinberger "makes the strange claim" that U.S. nuclear deterrence capability would be eroded if we announced that we would never use our nuclear weapons first.

"Quite the contrary, if the Soviets knew that we threatened a first strike, they would have every incentive to launch first and preempt it," he said.

Caldicott noted Defense Department plans call for 15,000 or more new warheads.

"These numbers include new weapons, such as the MX and Trident-2 missiles, both touted by their designers as first-strike and counterforce rather than 'deterrent' weapons," she said.

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